

## Fearless

Creative Nonfiction • Anvitha Yalavarthy

I kicked a rock along the dirt path as I, along with the rest of my class, made my way to a large semi-outdoor auditorium about a mile and a half away from our school. We were shepherded out of our class first thing that morning. No one knew why, but no one questioned it - we were just happy that our classes were cancelled. As we piled into the auditorium, I noticed it wasn't just our school there, but random people from the community too. I slouched onto my seat and my best friend plopped down next to me and snuggled against me, her head on my shoulder, and said "If we weren't going to have class, why couldn't they just let us sleep?"

Slowly, people started to walk on stage. Our principal. The founder of our school. An old man from the community who'd tell me off for running in the dining hall every once in a while. One woman I couldn't recognize. And they started talking about the female body.

I heard groans all around me. Not exactly something sleepy eighth graders want to hear at eight in the morn-

ing. I heard bits and pieces of the speech, “women are to be respected...” “the nation is watching...” “you must learn when you are young...” I didn’t know what they were talking about or why they were saying these things. I dozed off.

About a week later, I walked into the library, with an hour to my next class, and picked up a newspaper that caught my eye. A picture of a shadow of a girl with a lot of red outlining took up half the front page.

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“Police brace for chaos after victim of hours-long New Delhi gang rape dies in Singapore hospital.”

*National Post, December 2012*

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A 23-year old medical student in Delhi went to a movie with a friend to celebrate being done with her exams. They got on a bus. Six men were on the bus. The friend was beaten, the girl was raped and tortured and left for dead. She was found on the side of the road in the middle of the night, hanging on by a thread. The nature of the crime had caused such outrage that the government flew her to Singapore to give her the best possible care and her best chance at survival. The news didn’t skimp on the grisly details of her mutilation and death.

Don’t do *this*. That’s why we had that assembly. They were telling us not to do *this*.

I threw up.

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“My daughter’s name was Jyothi Singh. I am not ashamed to name her.”

*Times of India, December 2015*

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They call her Nirbhaya. Nirbhaya means fearless. They call her that because they say she fought until her body gave up. That name has long bothered me. She may have fought, but I doubt she was fearless. She was a girl on a bus who didn’t ask for any of what happened to her, no matter what the lawyers or the government may say. Her death became a cause. People rallied and they cried and fought for justice and for change. Never again, they said. And for a time, I thought that change occurred. Laws were amended. The Nirbhaya Act broadened the terms of sexual assault. It acknowledged that men can be assaulted too and that acid attacks are a terrible crime. I could have told them that even before Nirbhaya, but better late than never, I guess.

People call her Nirbhaya. Sometimes I think that name is more for the people who want to believe in fearlessness than the truth of the situation. And sometimes I think memorializing that name somehow makes fear a lesser thing, as though fear is to be ashamed of.

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“Delhi rapist says victim shouldn’t have fought back.”

*BBC News, March 2015*

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*India’s Daughter*, a documentary about the infamous Delhi rape, included interviews with the rapists, their lawyers, their parents and the parents of the victims too. A British filmmaker jumped through all the hoops put in front of her to make this documentary. And, immediately after its release, it was banned in India. The government didn’t want India to be seen in any negative light. It’s bad for the country’s reputation, they said.

They forgot, though, that this documentary aired in most other countries. I found it online pretty quick, as did most people. It took me five hours to get through an hour-long documentary. I paused it 6 times to go for a run. The crime was horrific, so horrific that the whole country came to a halt as they processed it. But this was something else. This was more than the crime; it was a way of thought. One of the rapists spoke freely and in a shockingly matter-of-fact tone about exactly what he did. There was no guilt. No remorse. Nothing. His lawyer said, “a decent girl wouldn’t be out after 9 pm” and that the men were “well within their rights to teach her a lesson.” Their defense wasn’t that they didn’t do it. It was that what they did was not wrong.

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“7 years after Nirbhaya, Hyderabad rape and murder shocks the nation.

Victim named Disha.”

*Times of India, November 2020*

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Disha means direction. The victim of the Hyderabad rape was given that name, much like Nirbhaya was given hers. The cops said they hoped Disha would serve as a symbol of change. A new direction for the country, as it were. But seven years earlier, they’d said never again. I heard them say it, over and over; government officials on the news, policemen every chance they got, protestors chanting on the streets. They’d said never again. And yet, here we are.

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My brother texted me one day last year.

“You really had it easy growing up.”

He probably wasn’t wrong, but I needed context.

“What do you mean?”

He told me about his friend, a girl we knew in middle school, who complained to him constantly that if she ever wanted to go out, her brother would be sent with her too. I sympathize.

“But we’re girls living in Hyderabad,” I told him. “That’s how life works for us.”

"Oh, please," he said. "You had so much freedom. You could always do whatever you wanted and go wherever you pleased."

"Excuse me?" I asked. "What makes you think I could ever let me go anywhere or do anything alone?"

"I was there with you. I know you were allowed off on your own."

"Right. And you think that I *wanted* to spend every minute of my time with you all those years?"

"Oh..."

We really did live different lives.

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"Accused in Disha case killed in police encounter."

*Times of India, December 2020*

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The story goes that the detectives in charge of the investigation took the four accused men out to the scene of the crime to get a more detailed explanation of events. The men took the opportunity, while at the scene, to attack the cops. The cops, as self-defense, shot the men.

But that's just the story.

Why would the cops take prisoners out of their cells at 4 am to go to a crime scene? Why were these prisoners not in handcuffs? How could four scrawny, barely legal boys be a threat to a hoard of policemen with guns?

The unspoken truth, what everyone knows but won't fight because the outcome is backed by public outrage, is that this was a planned and silently executed extrajudicial killing. See, these men were accused of rape and murder. They had, according to the cops, stalked a girl, slashed her tires while she was at a doctor's appointment in an attempt to keep her in the parking lot in the dark, raped her and then burned her alive in an attempt to get rid of the evidence.

When she was found, the city erupted in outrage, demanding justice. Soon after, four men were arrested. And not days later, they were killed in suspicious circumstances.

Justice. That's all I heard about this case after, was that justice had been served.

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*Hyderabad police issue advisory for women.*

Important message to all girls:

Follow these steps when travelling anywhere.

- If you are in a helpless situation, please shout.
- Always pretend you are on the phone with a relative. Even better if you can pretend that relative is a cop.
- Don't stay in dark suspicious places.

I have this habit of blacking out, on paper, things that bother me. If something's not already on paper, I first write it down and then I black it out.

I left the advisory on my desk, shredded by the repeated scraping of an almost-out-of-ink Sharpie.

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*Delhi Crime*, a series based on the immediate aftermath of Nirbhaya, came out on Netflix. This show centers around the capture of the men. A female cop took charge. She delegated only to other women. She didn't trust a single man to handle this case the way she needed it to be handled. She'd rather have a rookie female cop just two days out of the academy working this case rather than the highly ranked men they had expected her to use. She caught six men for the rape and murder of a 23-year-old girl. Of the six men, one committed suicide in jail. One was released because he was not yet 18. And not only did she catch six men with no leads, but she ensured that not a single thing was missed, not a single piece of evidence mishandled.

"They're going to hang for what they did to this girl," she says.

And sure enough, the four remaining are now on death row.

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"A rapist on death row in India argues he should be spared hanging.

Pollution is killing me anyway, he says."

*CNN, December 2020*

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Someone once told me that any principle you believe in, any value you hold dear, can break if you push the argument far enough. I don't believe anyone has the right to take a life. I don't believe the judicial system nor the laws themselves, especially in India, are flawless enough to make such a permanent decision. I do not believe in the death penalty.

But I've noticed, as I half consciously bolden a black line in my planner over 7 am on March 3, 2020, that I find myself waiting for the execution. Waiting for not one, but four deaths.

I am uncomfortable.